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Book Review

Contemporary Voice of Dalit
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Debi Chatterjee, *Samaj, Rastra O Prantikata*. Anustup Prakashani, 2025, 248 pp., ₹500 (Hardback). ISBN: 978-93-93472-65-6.

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The marginalization of various underprivileged groups has long been a central focus of inquiry across numerous disciplines, a concern that has gained considerable momentum in recent decades. Scholars from diverse fields have extensively examined—and continue to do so—the lived experiences of marginalized communities in India, with the Bengali book *Samaj, Rastra O Prantikata* (translated as *Society, State and Marginality*), authored by Debi Chatterjee, a leading expert in Dalit studies, serving as another significant contribution in this regard. The book comprises a collection of 25 essays by Chatterjee, previously published in various small magazines in West Bengal, which eloquently address a wide array of topics, ranging from Dalits and their emancipators to Dalit women, women in general and issues concerning secularism, child labour and corruption, among others. The content of these essays can be discussed by categorizing them into five clusters, as each cluster addresses a central theme, except for the last one, the essays in which are somewhat diverse in nature but still related to each other.

Cluster 1 (Essays 1–4): The first four essays examine the deplorable condition of Dalits and the significance of their culture, literature and movements, both historically and in the contemporary context. While the first essay (pp. 11–20) thoroughly explores the intensifying marginalization of Dalits, driven by the mutually reinforcing forces of the neoliberal economy and right-wing Hindu nationalist politics, the second (pp. 21–27) and third (pp. 28–40) essays propose two solutions. The first advocates for strengthening an alternative Dalit culture to counter the hegemony of Brahminic culture, while the second discusses the need for the popularization of Dalit literature, which predominantly emerges from Dalit autobiographies—narratives of exploitative collective experiences, rather than individual ones, and distinct from the aesthetics of mainstream literature. The author contends that these will serve as catalysts in revitalizing Dalit movements, as valuable lessons can be drawn from the histories of such struggles. For this very purpose, the fourth essay (pp. 41–54) offers a comprehensive review of Dalit movements, from past to present.

Cluster 2 (Essays 5–8): The next four essays illuminate the multiple axes of oppression to which Dalit women, in particular, and women in Indian society more broadly are subjected. To depict the subjugation of Dalit women—who endure the dual oppression of caste and gender—Chatterjee, in her fifth essay (pp. 55–59), examines the arduous life of Dakshayani Velayudhan, a Dalit woman from the Pulayar community who later became a politician and a leader of her people. Intricate questions, such as how the experiences of Scheduled Caste women differ from those of *Savarna* women or how the identity and movement of Dalit women are being shaped, are explored in the sixth essay (pp. 60–69). Furthermore,

the author delineates the plight of Indian women at large in the seventh (pp. 70–75) and eighth (pp. 76–84) essays. The former focuses on the disadvantaged position of women in relation to labour and employment, particularly highlighting their dual burden of work—both within and beyond the household—as well as the additional challenges they face in the era of globalization, while the latter, in assessing women's conditions in the decades following Indian independence, underscores the necessity of an intersectional framework to effectively address and ameliorate their circumstances.

Cluster 3 (Essays 9–12): Essays in this cluster highlight the contributions of several notable yet often underappreciated Dalit leaders, including Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Harichand Thakur, Guruchand Thakur and Jogendranath Mandal. Beginning with an exploration of the unwavering efforts of Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule in advancing Dalit education in Maharashtra, the ninth essay (pp. 85–97) elaborates on their successful endeavour to establish a more effective system of primary education than that provided by government schools at the time. Chatterjee subsequently examines the religious-cum-social movement popularly known as the *Matua* movement, led by social reformers Harichand Thakur and his son Guruchand Thakur, in their initiatives to uplift the Namasudra community of undivided Bengal in the 10th essay (pp. 98–107), followed by an analysis of the relentless activism of the eminent politician Jogendranath Mandal, who lobbied on behalf of the Dalits of Bengal, advocating for their political and social advancement throughout his career, in the 11th essay (pp. 108–117). To bridge the remaining gaps in the lessons gleaned from these histories, the 12th essay (pp. 118–125) compellingly narrates the harrowing struggles of Dalit refugees from Bengal in the wake of Partition, shedding light on their political engagement and the broader political dynamics surrounding them.

Cluster 4 (Essays 13–17): These five essays examine various dimensions of Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's sociopolitical thought, with the 17th essay extending its purview to encompass the ideas of E. V. Ramasamy, also known as Periyar. In contemporary Indian politics, where Ambedkar is frequently invoked—often for electoral considerations—the author critically engages with the question: To whom does Ambedkar belong? In the 13th essay (pp. 126–132), Chatterjee asserts that Ambedkar belongs to no one except those who steadfastly uphold his principles. A necessary analysis of the values underpinning these principles unfolds in the subsequent essays: the 14th essay (pp. 133–141) deliberates on Ambedkar's vision of democracy and social justice; the 15th essay (pp. 142–149) examines his economic philosophy, shaped by a caste-informed understanding of class, and the 16th essay (pp. 150–162) explores the profound significance of his conversion to Buddhism as an alternative religion for Dalits. Finally, the 17th essay (pp. 163–173) presents a comparative study of the divergent approaches of Ambedkar and his contemporary Periyar in forging an alternative Dalit cultural identity—Ambedkar championing the values of Buddhism, while Periyar, in contrast, rejecting religion altogether in favour of rationalism.

Cluster 5 (Essays 18–25): The final eight essays are diverse in nature, addressing multifaceted issues related to marginalization, including the effects of neoliberalism, Hindu nationalist politics, caste-informed class formation, the politics of reservation, untouchability, child labour and corruption. In her attempt to unravel the reasons behind the escalating marginalization of various communities, Chatterjee first examines the devastating effects of neoliberalism in her 18th essay (pp. 174–189). Beyond the forces of globalization, the author illustrates how elements of mainstream Brahminic Hinduism further entrap Dalit communities in new forms of subjugation. To counter this, she underscores the necessity of recognizing the significance of the folk culture of these communities and advocating for an approach that synthesizes the philosophies of both Ambedkar and Periyar, as explored in the 19th essay (pp. 190–198).

Additionally, she emphasizes the urgency of eliminating the resurgence of *Manuvadi* ideals, which are being reinvented in contemporary forms, as discussed in the 20th essay (pp. 199–210).

According to Chatterjee, as revealed in her 21st essay (pp. 211–217), the Indian state today, in addition to largely losing its welfarist character, is witnessing the erosion of its secular values in the face of attacks by Hindu nationalist forces—a trend that began in the 1980s and has fuelled violence against minorities and other vulnerable communities in recent times. However, as she argues in her 22nd essay (pp. 218–225), those who attempt to advocate for these marginalized groups often fail to do so effectively, as many remain unable to grasp the intricate interplay of caste and class within the Indian context. In her 23rd essay (pp. 226–235), she further demonstrates how the politics of reservation—particularly the growing demands for quotas from various communities—has, in reality, undermined the original purpose of positive discrimination. To render her arguments more comprehensive, she examines, in her 24th (pp. 236–242) and 25th (pp. 243–248) essays the failure of Indian laws to address deeply entrenched malpractices such as untouchability and child labour, while also illustrating, through a case study of large-scale corruption in West Bengal's education sector, how pervasive governmental corruption continually exacerbates these issues.

Although offering a synoptic view of Chatterjee's book is a challenging endeavour, given that it engages with a wide range of issues and ideas, such an attempt nevertheless reveals some of the author's key arguments: it makes a compelling call for a 'Dalit alternative' to address the complex and multifaceted obstacles confronting the community; underscores the critical need for an intersectional framework that engages not only with the specific oppressions faced by Dalit women but also with the broader struggles of Indian women; highlights the significance of drawing upon the intellectual and political legacies of Dalit leaders in the pursuit of a shared political horizon; and reasserts the inescapable truth that the category of 'caste' must remain central to any serious analysis of the structural problems impeding India's trajectory towards development.

The traditional 'elites versus subalterns' binary in contemporary India, as illuminated by a growing body of recent scholarship, is under scrutiny in the face of increasing intra-subaltern tensions. These fissures have been strategically leveraged by right-wing and capitalist forces, thereby necessitating the conceptualization of a 'Dalit alternative' as an urgent and significant intervention—an idea strongly put forward by the author. While the contours and viability of such an alternative are subject to further critical inspection, the author posits that any substantive ideological resources necessary to achieve such an aim must be rooted in the positionality of iconic Dalit leaders and suggests an 'ideological synthesis', which offers a potentially transformative paradigm—especially pertinent in a context where Dalit figures are frequently reduced to cultic symbols or appropriated to legitimize partisan agendas. In parallel, Chatterjee's strong inclination towards an intersectional lens—in examining India's gendered issues and broader socio-economic and political problems—not only signals the author's position within the debates surrounding intersectionality in Indian feminist scholarship but also reflects her optimism about the conceptual efficacy of such an approach within the specificities of the Indian context.

After a thorough examination of the diverse ideas and arguments presented in the book, it can be unequivocally asserted that the work constitutes a profoundly significant contribution to the discourse on the study of marginality in India. That said, in certain respects, it transcends national boundaries, raising

thought-provoking questions that are not only pertinent to the Indian context but also serve as a valuable framework for analysing marginalized communities globally. Against the backdrop of a changing sociopolitical environment, this work stands as a clarion call for both activism and intellectual engagement. The essays collectively implore readers to recognize the importance of inclusive policies and strive for a truly just society, making this book an essential read for scholars and advocates of social justice alike.

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